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MY PUPILS.

“DOES Art or Genius enter chiefly into the composition of a dramatic work?” asked a gentleman of Rome two thousand years ago.

“Well!” replied Mr. Flaccus, whom we familiarly call Horace, “I cannot, for the life of me, see what one can do without the assistance of the other. Each is equally concerned in the result.”

This contention occupied the dilettante twenty centuries ago, and it outcomes again in this age, in the dispute between actors, as to whether their mimetic act is a craft, an artistic process, or an effusion, an ecstasy. A tragedian may claim to be infused at will by some such frenzy, and to produce his results by a psychic spasm; but let it be acknowledged that a comedian cannot deliver himself over to any such condition. He must be circumspect, his deliberate copy of nature is obtained by fidelity to its features, or by caricature of them. There can be no divine frenzy about *him*! But let us try to perceive if the tragedian be really so possessed. Can he work himself up into this transcendental state? Is there such a thing as tragic fits? *Hysteria dramatica*? Or is this claim a piece of esthetic affectation? Shakspeare seems to object to unbridled rage; he says that a tragedian should “in the torrent, tempest and whirlwind of his passion *acquire* and *beget* a temperance that shall give it smoothness.” Thus the actor-poet advises him to learn and cultivate by art to control his effusion! and goes further; he urges him to study appropriate gesture. How can this be done without a careful subordination of the divine fits to some method? Be it remembered he is speaking to a tragedian about tragedy. It is a comforting reflection that tragedians in Shakspeare’s time were quite as blatant as some that grace our boards! My personal acquaintance with,

and watchful study of, the greater tragedians of the present century, Rachel, Lemaitre, Ligier, Macready, Forrest, Kean, Salvini, Devrient, induce me to believe they never were, or pretended to be, under the transcendental craze ; but maintained their histrionic fury carefully bridled and bitted. Nearly every woman has the nervous faculty of making a hysterical fool of herself. Some men have the same power ; for the artistic mind, being incubative, is in a large degree—female. If you waggle your finger before the eyes of a bird placed on his back, he will be comatised !—and so, many artists waggle their fingers before their own eyes, and think their giddiness is inspiration ! If one of these actors, in the midst of his torrent and tempest, overheard a laugh or a hiss amongst the audience, his whirlwind would be changed in very short order into another kind of rage ! If the great emotional Miss N——, in the midst of the curse in “ Leah,” heard a whisper from the wing that her petticoat was coming down, the whole direction of her commination would be internally diverted from her lover to her dresser.

But let us proceed a step further. The repetition of words exercises a peculiar effect on the brain, which eventually loses all consciousness of their meaning, and utterance becomes mechanical. If any person will undertake to repeat a speech a great number of times he will find that, after a certain number, the sense of what he is talking about will fade, and subsequently the words will come involuntarily while he is thinking of something else. It has occurred to me, after playing a part for two or three hundred times, to find myself uttering the words, using the expression of face and all the artistic movements, without the slightest consciousness of what I am doing or saying, my mind being elsewhere. Some person would enter the theatre on whom I desired to make a favorable impression by the performance, and I would address myself attentively to my business. The words would leave me. To recover them I was obliged to remove my mind from attempting to remember, fix it on some other subject, and the mechanical memory would be restored. So it is with the tragedian who has appeared a thousand times in *Hamlet* ; it is physically impossible for his mind to act otherwise than mechanically after a certain time ! What then becomes of his divine frenzy ? The clergyman who, following the ritual, is obliged to repeat so frequently the Lord’s Prayer, is affected in a like

manner, and the clerical monotony of his delivery of the service is very different from the tones in which he impresses his sermon.

If these instances be correct, their inference is that acting is not different from other arts. The painter and the sculptor, inspired by genius, produce great works, but they are not so inspired when they are employed in making replicas of such works; they are simply copying themselves, and their effort is mechanical. Will any actor or actress contend that the simple incident of a crying child amongst the audience does not instantly bring down the loftiest flight of passion to a sense of petty annoyance? I have heard a great actress, in the torrent and tempest of her passion, with her breast heaving with simulated emotion, her voice tremulous, and tears streaming from her eyes, proceed thus while performing *Constance* in "King John":

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me.

[*Aside to the prompter*: "Send somebody in front, and have that child put out."]

Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts.

[*Sotto voce*. I shall break down if that squeaker is not choked by somebody.]
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form!
Then have I reason to be fond of grief.
Fare you well! [*Tears her hair*.]

Had you such a loss as I,
I could give better comfort than you do.
I will not keep this form upon my head
When there is such disorder in my wit.

[*"What can the ushers be doing, to allow this."* Then she tried to overwhelm the infant by a torrent of passion that seemed to me more like the roar of an infuriated tigress.]

Oh, Lord! my boy! my Arthur! my fair son.
My life! my joy! my food. My all the world!
My widow comfort, and my sorrow's care.

A whirlwind of applause followed her off the stage, where she was accommodated with a chair, seated in which she gave vent to further sentiments not Shakspearean, nor in the maternal vein. During her passion scene I failed to detect any lack of tenderness in her voice. Her face was full of the feeling with which she was supposed to be overwhelmed. The artistic process of simulation was in grand operation, while her mind was possessed with a very different passion. Every actor who has experience in performing with our leading tragedians, can recall scores of

similar incidents. If I, then, lift the corner of the stage curtain to betray the secrets of our art, it is not out of disrespect of that art ; but to expose the fatuity of the pretence that an actor is a kind of poet in action. He is truly only an embodiment, in which the poet is the soul.

Some three or four years ago theatrical London was moved in the direction of a school for acting, and I was invited by the heads of the stage to give my views of this matter. They were, as they always have been, very decided. First : that acting could be taught only on the stage, as swimming can only be taught in the water, and riding on horseback. All chamber tuition is worthless. Elocution and declamation is the last, not the first, lesson a young actor or actress should learn. The stage is a picture frame, in which is exhibited that kind of panorama, where the picture being unrolled is made to move, passing before the spectator with scenic continuity. As these scenes are directed toward the spectator, the art of the persons, being figures in them, is to so present themselves that, although engaged with each other, they may be presented also to the audience, whose sympathies the action is intended to arouse. These conditions are the postulates of our art, which is addressed to the eye as well as to the ear. For if the agony of one who suffers from a great misfortune be expressed by words alone, we fail to believe in it unless the expression of the face and the gestures of passion, and the natural movement of the body under such mental torture, accompany and enforce the diction. I deny that such can be taught and practiced on a hearth rug. I deny that *Antony* can address an imaginary populace, that *Romeo* can make love to an absent *Juliet*, or kill an ideal *Tybalt*. All the adjuncts must be present, the scene must be acted, not declaimed, and all the interlocutors must share in it, all the movements must take place, for the individual student is only a part of a whole.

And so it came to pass that a certain manager in New York, having entertained similar convictions on these subjects, offered the use of his theatre and all its appliances to establish a school upon this scheme. But he carried it further. He undertook to furnish all the expenses attending the enterprise, so the students should obtain instruction free ; and still further, he proposed to select fifteen of the most promising and pay them a weekly salary. When this proposal was made public—it was at first received with

incredulity—the applications for admission numbered daily from seventy to one hundred.

At a preliminary inspection, the greater number were excluded, and restored to the useful occupations they were more fitted to fill. Those who passed inspection were subjected to examination. To each was assigned a short scene for study, and a day appointed to witness their attempts. Again a selection was made and many rejected. About eighty remained, and of these the Madison Square School of Instruction was formed. Out of the singular experience we enjoyed, we discovered that for one male student showing any promise of excellence, we had six female pupils. The gentlemen were, for the most part, awkward, stiff, ungainly and slow; the ladies graceful, quick and refined. Among the lady students we found twenty-two who aspired to be *Juliets* and *Paulines* and *Parthenias*, and one who consented to play old women! When faced with this result, Mr. Palmer could not refrain from quoting *Falstaff's* bill of fare: "Two gallons of sack to one half penny worth of bread!"

When the school was formed, they were called into the auditorium of the theatre, and assembled in the orchestra seats. The following *menu* for the day had been previously issued: the Garden Scene in "Romeo and Juliet"; the fifth act of "The Rivals"; the fourth act of "King John"; the third act of "The School for Scandal"—each part in these scenes or acts was cast to two or three different students. "Romeo and Juliet" was called; two of the students stepped upon the stage and played the scene, while the whole school became spectators, and as corrections were made by the director, and faults explained, the lesson was conveyed equally to the two performers and to the audience. In the midst of this scene, it was stopped; one of the performers was invited to retire amongst the spectators, and a new *Romeo* or *Juliet* was called forward to proceed with the performance. It soon became evident that this second performer had already profited by what had been seen, and took care to avoid similar errors.

The system thus first introduced by the Madison Square School into theatrical affairs has developed two unexpected results. The students are seized with "stage fright," precisely as they would be liable to be affected before a public audience. Then, extreme eagerness to excel each other is excited by the hearty applause

with which any excellence is recognized ; and this acute perception of what is good is a sign of the artistic quality ; for surely the fine critic is only a disembodied artist. Stage fright, like seasickness, is overcome at last, and is better to be so before the student appears in public.

Another feature introduced by Mr. Palmer into this scheme, is the production of new plays by American authors, who can find no public appearance elsewhere. To render full justice to these plays the assistance of professional actors will be called on. To the most select students, parts in the performance will be intrusted, and it is gratifying to discover amongst the female students several who will inevitably occupy very distinguished places on the American stage.

DION BOUCICAULT.